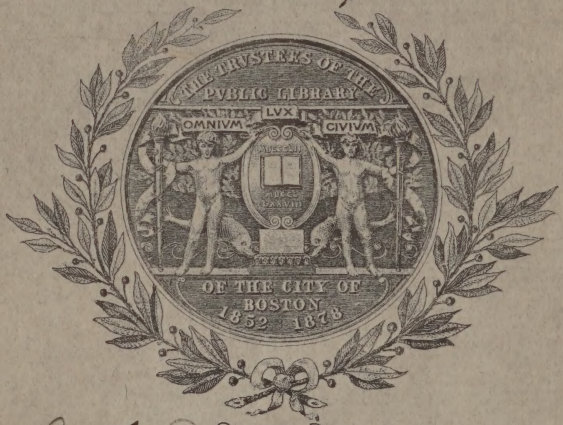
No. 212,220



GIVEN BY

C. F. D. Belden

The Delights of a Hobby
Some Experiences in Book Collecting

Luther A. Brewer

Reprinted from the NINETEENTH YEAR
BOOK OF THE BIBLIOPHILE SOCIETY, 1920

PUBLIC LIBRARY
OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON

2127.220

THE DELIGHTS OF A HOBBY

C. F. D. Baldwin
Nov. 15 1915

THE DELIGHTS OF A HOBBY

SOME EXPERIENCES IN BOOK-COLLECTING

By Luther A. Brewer

For out of the old fields, as men saithe,
Cometh al this new corne fro yere to yere.
And out of old bookes, in good faithe,
Cometh al this new science that men lere.

—CHAUCER

I became a victim to the book-collecting "bug" while a student in a Maryland small-town grammar school, and I have been a book-lover and book-collector ever since. It was my good fortune to have as a teacher a genuine lover of literature and of books. Friday afternoons were given up wholly to the reading of the best things in English literature. I recall most distinctly the *Pickwick Papers*. A love for Dickens was the result, and I was soon as steeped in Dickens as David Copperfield was in his love for Dora. Not being financially able

4663

at the time to acquire a bound set of his works, I did the next possible thing—bought, for a few pennies, issues of the Seaside Library, in quarto size, on cheap paper, without wrappers. No thrill of book-collecting joy has ever come to me in later years that exceeded the happiness that was mine when the mails brought me a large package of the stories of Dickens in this inexpensive form.

There also came early into my hands a cheap paper bound edition of the works of Shakespeare, and I spent many a glorious summer afternoon in the shade of an old apple tree, with this precious volume as my sole companion.

About the same time there fell into my hands, by a happy chance, a sale catalogue sent out by the now almost forgotten auction house of Bangs and Company. From my first venture as a bidder I secured an early edition of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense,* and a copy of a book entitled *Sermons on Death.* The latter volume I bid on because of its date—middle of the seventeenth century—and for no other reason, as I now recall it. I have since learned that an old date is not an infallible badge of value. But for old time's sake, I retain to this

and the possibilities of "finds" draw one irresistibly.

The collector who derives the greatest joy from his hobby is he who does his own hunting. There's no real bibliophilic sport in giving a blanket order to a buyer. The joys of a collector come through pursuit no less than possession. Item by item — hunting in out of the way places — suddenly and unexpectedly finding a gem in a rubbish pile; making mistakes, yes, but that only adds to the human side of the search.

The pursuit of a hobby often leads one into pleasant places; for example, searching for coveted items in the dust and confusion to be found in the cellar of a London book-seller on Oxford street, where "ragged veterans" lie covered with grime. And the joy of those rare occasions when one finds a treasure that the wily merchant is willing to part with at a reasonable price! Some years ago I found in this shop on Oxford street — on the floor, in one corner where a few volumes had been thrown — one of the scarcest of the William Loring Andrews publications. I tossed it aside and a little later asked the price, at the same time giv-

ing the book a slight kick to show my indifference. I bought it for a few shillings; but the book-seller's conscience was not altogether clear as to the wisdom of the sale, and he remarked to an American dealer who was present, "I believe I sold that book too cheap." "Oh no," was the quick retort, "you were never known to do such a thing." The dealer had made a reasonable profit on the transaction, for he had bought the volume in a lot with others, and had made more than the Dutchman's one per cent.

Goodspeed's sub-basement in Boston, in the early days, also furnished sport for the knowing collector, though one was compelled to emerge at frequent intervals into the upper rooms to escape from the oppressive dampness of the place and the foul air. But there was delight there for the experienced book-hunter.

Collectors who knew Bertram Dobell and his London book shop always had great fun, when in that city, in "pawing" over the huge piles of books to be found on the floor of his small room. Dobell was a prince of a bookman from a collector's standpoint, for he always had bargains to offer, and with no regrets that he had parted

with his precious possessions at prices that were too cheap.

I need not speak to my fellow-bibliophiles of the fascination of the auction room, its uncertainties, especially for the distant buyer: the wait for the statement, then for the precious article itself. Or perhaps that lot number so and so, on which you bid fifteen dollars, sold for $150.

An experience: Hunt item nicely bound, a delight to the touch and the sight, bound by experienced binders with a knowledge of first editions; and a year or two later when another copy of the same item, dirty and ragged, with binding broken, but original, falls into your hands at a bargain, you're glad to have it in both forms — for they make fine companions in the case.

Then long afterward, when the winds are whistling outside and the fire burns on the hearth, you sit down with these two companions to discover in a few minutes that the handsome copy lacks two leaves of an extract at the end of the Preface — a fact you might never have discovered save for the accident that sent to

you — when you thought that really you didn't need it — the crippled volume in its original binding.

One learns many lessons as he follows his pursuit of a hobby; and one of these lessons is never to be too certain that any particular book is perfect.

As all knowledge is of more or less importance in life's activities, whether directly related to your particular vocation or not, so is knowledge important in the pursuit of the books that you are certain you ought to possess.

It is not out of place to say that men with hobbies — collectors of things unique or rare, or both, are as a rule a benevolent lot. While there is a peculiar pleasure in the thought that you have something no one else possesses or can possess, yet the true collector is ever ready to share his joy with others. We know there are philistines even in this day who hold to the contrary. As a class, collectors — book-collectors above all — are looked upon by some as a selfish, acquisitive lot, as living lives apart from the many. They are pointed at in places where people congregate; sometimes they are charged with being peculiar. It has even been hinted at

day these inconsequential items. They represent the beginnings of a hobby that has grown more acute and more satisfying with the advancing years, — a hobby that has meant much to one who ever has been compelled to labor day and night.

After college days when I migrated west to Iowa, the chief and most valuable part of my baggage was the box of books which represented the collections of my youth and which were acquired chiefly in the auction room. In those days I had no other source of acquisition, as there were no rare book dealers known to me. The microbe thus early implanted is still at work making the sunset years mellow and happy. It is said that first loves are lasting. Certainly habits formed in youth are wont to be steadfast.

You may break, you may shatter, the vase if you will,
The scent of the roses will hover round it still.

And blessed is the man with a hobby. Happy is the man who collects. Some collect books; some, prints; some, coins; some, bugs and butterflies; some, two or more of the things here

enumerated. And the man who does not have a hobby of some sort fails to make full use of the privileges that are his by divine right. Some of his faculties lie dormant. I love the companionship of the man with a hobby. He has resources within himself that make for fellowship, that dispel loneliness and ennui. He is a superior companion.

We often associate distinguished men of the past with their hobbies. When we think of Samuel Johnson, we recall that he loved to consume great quantities of tea. And we cannot dissociate from the memory of Charles Lamb the remembrance of his love for books — and old cheese — and how he and Mary often denied themselves the necessaries of life, that an old folio might be purchased. And we can easily imagine how these two congenial souls delighted in turning the leaves of some volume they had thus obtained through sacrifice.

Can anything be more satisfying to a lover of books than browsing in an old book shop? Can any genuine lover of so-called "inconsiderate trifles" pass by such an opportunity? The very aroma of such a place has its appeal. The disordered piles of printed matter are alluring,

evidenced by the fact that they willingly pay a sum approximating three figures for his *Songs of the Trawlers,* 1916; a pamphlet of twelve pages, privately issued in an edition of twenty-five copies.

Some six years ago I chanced to secure a brief letter by this author in which he seemed to be negotiating with a London publisher for the bringing out of a book to which he had secured subscriptions. The letter was without date and was written from Exeter College, Oxford. Query: but what was the publication? The mystery was solved one day while the poet was a guest in my home. Across one corner of the letter is now written: "Letter about first book to the publisher, Grant Richards, 1902, *The Loom of Years.* A. N." The next move was to find a copy of the book. This I was able to do in a few days, despite the author's statement that it was out of print, and he had not seen a copy for years. A complete set of first editions of this beloved author now fills a shelf in my book-case, nearly all autographed on a subsequent visit.

I am now endeavoring to collect a complete set of first editions of Leigh Hunt.

"Why Leigh Hunt?" I've been asked. "Why not Shelley, Lamb, Keats, or Byron, with all of whom he held fellowship? Surely," they say, "these are more worth while authors." Granted. But one who starts out to collect the works of an author ought to give some thought to the possibilities. He should figure out the likelihood of being able to secure a complete collection. It is easier to gather a fairly complete set of firsts of Leigh Hunt than it is of any one of the other authors named.

Then, with some of us, the matter of cost is to be considered. Some prudence here is necessary. With Shelley, and Keats, and Lamb — in some instances single items calling for thousands, when you have only tens or possibly hundreds to spend — you would be making yourself an unsatisfied collector to undertake the annexation of those things which, while not robbing the other fellow, would make you financially poor indeed. Then, too, mine has been the lot desired by that ancient who stated that he was neither too rich nor too poor, and who was glad that it had not been his fate to have his money run him.

I really cannot say just now why I began to

that they are not averse to the acquisition of bookish treasures by the process of adhesion if they can not get them by legitimate means of gift or purchase. True, some of our class, weaker than others, at times may be willing to acquire a much desired prize at a sum less than its true value; but we should not be anathematized for adding to our possessions that which does not make the seller poorer while enriching the buyer. We could not — the vast majority of us — remain long in the business if deprived of the privilege of securing an occasional bargain.

Those who collect, though only in a modest way, well know the feelings with which they are regarded by their friends. "What's the use," they argue, "in gathering books and autographs and prints in such profusion and confusion?" Time and again we have been asked, hesitatingly, but meaningly: "Have you read all these volumes?" with a wave of the hand at the well-filled shelves. What can one do but ignore such a foolish question? It is useless to argue with one so lacking in appreciation of the pursuits of a collector.

Aristophanes in *The Frogs* laughs at Euri-

pides because he collected books, and he has many imitators today who can see no profit, spiritual or material, in collecting. We are rather followers of Cicero, who was not ashamed to speak a kindly word for the books that "shelter and solace us in adversity, bring enjoyment at home, befriend us out of doors, pass the night with us." Most of us have a sympathetic and kindly feeling for Charles Lamb, who enjoyed a book "over a pipe," which he thought "is the maximum." Some of us can even sympathize with the wish of Leigh Hunt, who longed to choose the manner of his death —with his head upon a beloved volume.

I scarcely need to defend the hobby of book-collecting in a publication that goes to my fellow-members of The Bibliophile Society; yet perhaps it may interest them to hear of common experiences. It is a maxim with newspaper men that readers have an especial interest in perusing the account of an occurrence they have witnessed, if it is only a write-up of a dog-fight, and the first item in the paper sought by the lady who has been the host at a brilliant function the night before is the account of it in

the society column of the next morning's issue.

The man who pursues diligently the hobby of collecting the books he needs to make his life a satisfying one learns many things before he has progressed very far. His is a developing life. The books that appeal to him in the early days do not always hold their interest in subsequent years. He does not love his hobby the less, but the object of his affection changes. There also are those who buy just *books*; and are content to fill the house with printed volumes without regard to date, printer, author, or association. For its owner such an assortment has only an impersonal collective interest, perhaps about the same as the kitchen utensils, or the bricks in the chimney.

Book-buyers of this class doubtless get their reward, but the keener pleasure, as I see it, comes to the collector who specializes. He may have more than one specialty — first editions, of one author or of several; association copies, bindings, illustrated volumes. But whatever he undertakes, it should be his aim to confine his activities largely along certain definite lines, aiming always at completion. Therein lies the true joy. The temptation, however, to break

this rule is irresistible with most of us. At this time, for instance, I collect first editions of Leigh Hunt, books once owned by him and bearing annotations throughout the text in his handwriting, presentation, and association copies.

But my love has not always been thus centered. Twenty years ago James Whitcomb Riley, of blessed memory, appeared in Cedar Rapids with the humorist, Bill Nye. A few of us gave these distinguished Hoosiers a dinner, and I number among my treasures, as a souvenir of that occasion, a copy of his *Love Lyrics* inscribed "With greetings, James Whitcomb Riley, Cedar Rapids, Dec. 10, 1900."

One hot Sunday, fifteen years later, Edwin Markham dropped in for a visit, and the legacy left on the following morning was a first edition of his *Shoes of Happiness* with two or three corrections noted in the text, and on the fly-leaf these words: "To Luther A. Brewer, friend of friends, and my friend! Here's wishing you pleasant adventures in the happy shoes. Edwin Markham."

Alfred Noyes is now a name that appeals to many knowing and appreciative collectors, as

collect Leigh Hunt books. I imagine, however, it was partly because of a sympathetic feeling I possess for a fellow-lover of books, and then the realization that perhaps I could do fairly well at it without eventually getting into the bankruptcy courts. But I never dreamed at the time that I would pay — or that I would be called upon to pay — such long prices as I have willingly paid for such items as no Hunt collector can afford to be without. The ambition of a collector grows by what it feeds upon.

I have progressed far enough in my diligent pursuit for Hunt items to see, just over the brow of the hill, the collector's Finis; not that same finis that marks the conclusion of a book, for a collector can never console himself with the thought that there is nothing beyond. Labor as he will to collect, there is yet something incompleted — but I believe I have about all the known Hunt rarities.

Among these is the proof sheet of a broadside written by S. C. Hall of a testimonial promoted by Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, B. W. Procter, W. C. Macready, Charles Kent, and others, for the erection of a tomb in Kensal Green Cemetery to the memory

of Leigh Hunt, with numerous autograph corrections by Browning. And further, a statement in Browning's autograph of the condition of the bank account of the memorial fund, showing a balance of £183-10-0, while only £150-0-0 were asked. How much greater the joy of capturing this treasure than that which comes from the acquisition of the gold accumulated by the man without the collecting hobby!

Again, Leigh Hunt's *The Descent of Liberty, a Mask,* 1815, a first edition of no especial rarity, worth only two or three dollars in its original binding of paper boards, with edges uncut, but covered with the dust and dirt of a century, is worthy of its present abode in a handsome morocco case, for it bears on the half-title these words in the author's autograph:

"To Lord Byron,
with the author's best remembrances."

"Best remembrances" here is fine. A few years later Hunt could not have written that inscription, for his criticism of Byron in his *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* showed that the relation of the two men had become strained. The volumes were published

in 1828. Byron had lost his life in Greece in 1824, but Hunt failed to recall that excellent maxim, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum.* To his credit be it said that in after years he repented of his action and made open and public acknowledgment of his error. He did not, however, retract his charges, but he did confess it would have been the generous thing not to have penned the criticism.

In this somewhat rambling story of experiences perhaps it is pertinent to mention a London book shop known the world over, — that of Maggs Bros. Here indeed one can find great things in books, and in perfect condition. Their statement as to a volume can be depended upon. And a great joy it is to browse among their treasures. It's almost worth a trip across the sea just to spend a day in their place. No keener book-gathering pleasures have ever come to me than those experienced in this great book emporium, where I was permitted to be alone with the wealth of books, manuscripts, and prints that their vast stores contain. And few delights are richer to a book lover than to be permitted to browse alone in a treasure-house of books.

There are book shops and book shops. The ideal one to a book-lover is that place where they permit you to be alone, with no solicitous clerk constantly at your elbow asking you what you want. Rarely do you know what you do want when you go into an old book shop. Certainly it is gall to your very soul to have some self-important young man with hair combed back from his forehead, or some young woman with an obsequious smile, insist upon knowing "What can I show you today?" One doesn't want to be *shown* anything, and yet he wants to *see* many things. With Charles Lamb we can utter the cry, "Oh, the comfort of sitting down heartily to an old folio, and thinking that the next hour or two will be your own — and the misery of being defeated by the reckless call of somebody!"

Cedar Rapids, Iowa
August 1, 1920

Boston Public Library
Central Library, Copley Square

Division of
Reference and Research Services

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.

Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

JAN 3 1926

Boston Public Library

This book is to be returned to the Library on or before the date last stamped below.

NOV 20 1951

FORM NO. 609: 10.2,51. 100M.